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The Uncanny Body: From Medical to Aesthetic Abnormality

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In this essay I explore a possibility of experiential synthesis of the medicalized abnormal body with its aesthetic images. A personal narrative about meeting extreme abnormality serves as an introduction into theorizing aesthetic abnormality. The essay builds its argument on the phenomenological grounds; I therefore approach corporeality with Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In turn, Max Ernst introduces an aesthetic frame for the subsequent examination of uncanny surreality. Two exemplars of the surreal body, Joel Witkin's "Satiro" and Don DeLillo's "Body Artist," intend to substantiate the preceding theoretic. The study shows how the encounter with the abnormal embodiment may suspend normalized modes of constitution to provoke uncanny experiences.

In this essay I investigate the possibility of approaching the abnormal body as an experiential manifold. Specifically, I argue that under certain conditions, such as an aesthetic encounter, the experience of the embodied abnormality is given as a syncretism of several modes of givenness which produce a multilayered engagement with the sphere other than real. For a phenomenological grounding of abnormality, I call on Edmund Husserl. Maurice Merleau-Ponty enriches the Husserlian insights with his phenomenology of intercorporeality. Dialogically positioned, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty help us understand how the abnormal other could be revealed beyond either representational aestheta or body-in-empathy to appear as an estranged but productive fusion of art and body in the sphere of its own, the uncanny. I thematize the uncanny with the surreal art of Max Ernst. The phenomenologically motivated argument opens with a personal experience of the abnormal body and its aesthetic context, which serves as the guiding clue for the subsequent analysis. In order to extend the analysis past the personal experience, I conclude with two exemplars from the artistic realm. The works of Joel-Peter Witkin and Don DeLillo diversify the structure of the uncanny abnormality with two extra modalities: symbolic figuration, and narrative ir-reality. I begin with the experience that begot this essay, a personal encounter with the abnormal body.

The encounter occurred in the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf at the "Surrealismus" Art Exhibit in August of 2005. The actual meeting took place in the Max Ernst section of the exhibit. It is there that I saw a person whose

appearance broke any and every anticipation of an embodied human being. The person “stood” next to Ernst’s painting “The Teetering Woman.” The person’s face, haircut, and clothes indicated the female gender. I could guess her age as being about forty years old. Sunk deeply into the electrical chair, the woman was holding an audio-guide in her toes, bending toward it for better hearing. She had no arms and used her naked feet to adjust her child-like body to change the field of vision. Judging by the apparent ease with which she moved herself in the chair and, simultaneously, moved the chair, her comportment was unreflectively habitual to her; no noticeable disjunction of motility could be detected. After the guided message ended, the woman put the recorder in her lap, and, with the help of her feet, pulled herself up. Then, the short stub of her right shoulder touched the control lever and rolled the chair to the next painting. As she moved further away, I heard someone behind me whisper, “Contergan.” I inquired. The results of that inquiry were various medical, social, and psychological consequences of the condition known as Contergan. Briefly, Contergan is a specific condition caused by the drug “Contergan” that contains the active substance



Figure 1. Contergan Hypnotikum

Thalidomid (see Figure1).

Thalidomid was isolated in 1956 by German chemist Heinrich Mueckler and commercialized the same year by the German pharmaceutical giant Gruenthal AG as Contergan, a tranquilizer and sleeping aid. Owing to its presumed

safety and effectiveness, the drug became especially popular with pregnant women. However, having been inadequately tested, Contergan proved to be faulty, causing severe side-effects. In its fetus affective capacity, Contergan seems to be potent only during the first trimester. Between 1958 and 1961, about ten thousand deformed children were born to the drug using pregnant mothers, mostly in Germany but also in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden. All the drug-induced deformities concern upper and lower extremities, spinal column, and knee joints, resulting in the condition commonly known as dwarfism (see Figure 2). Mental capacities of the Contergan patients remained largely unaffected. There had been very few post-natal degenerative effects as well. Except for the treatment of the spinal cord in most



Figure 2. Contergan Baby

severe cases, no inpatient medical aid had been required for the Contergan population, only general, albeit involved, home care.¹ Those medical specialists who came to research Contergan in the wake of this social drama noticed that Contergan's abnormality did not connote debilitation but has a productive, generative facet; it

turned out that they are extremely adaptable to their environment, treating with extraordinary ease those technological implements that had been abundantly designed to assist them.² By the same token, the Contergan people exhibited unusually strong artistic inclinations, often tending to extreme forms of abstraction. In the next section, I would like to reflect on the experience of meeting the Contergan person, for it is the lingering unease of that experience that alerted me to its complexity and, at the same time, significance. I begin with the general considerations as they refer to the abnormal body. On the basis of those, I argue for the relationship between aesthetics and corporeality, and, more specifically, between art *in extremis* and the abnormal body. I end by locating both in the uncanny sphere.

The Abnormal Body

From the perspective of the normal body, a Contergan body is abnormal and therefore disabled. The mundane attitude allows for a range of acceptable forms of abnormalities, some of which are symbolically socialized into familiar types. That is how a person in the wheelchair or a person with a cane, or an armless person would have been experienced. Often, these types of abnormal bodies are given with their corresponding contexts that immediately connect us inferentially to the cause of their abnormality, be it a tragic accident, a natural disaster, or simply and, most inconspicuously, age. Yet, with the artistic exhibit forming the aesthetic horizon for my perception, other factors notwithstanding, the experience of the Contergan person's dysfunctional abnormality arrived defamiliarized by other concurrent experiences. These other experiences prevented me from both simply stating the fact of abnormality but also connecting the abnormal body to the lived body of mine in an act of empathetic congruence. It did manage, however,

to awaken the sense of wonder, the very awe that arises from encountering something, someone so odd that no available pre-formed measure is capable of giving the encounter any sensible explanation.

The Contergan body was out-worldly. It belonged to a place of which I had no conception, could never visit, never apprehend. This inaccessible homefulness of the other prevented me from assuming a superior position of the normal person, cut short a build-up of empathy, but also precluded blunt objectivization.³ The Contergan woman was wondrous. Moreover, there was extreme art about her body. And, importantly, her abnormality did not come with or at a distance but pulled myself to itself, as only utter vulnerability could pull. At the same time, this surge of responsibility was frustrated at the very moment of recognizing the other body, for the Contergan person was absolutely inaccessible to me, and so the call could find no outlet in an empathetic connection. The absolute and uplifted strangeness of the Contergan person compromised the horizontal reach of empathy, preventing me from taking empathy for the foundational structure of apprehending “the sick, diseased, and other abnormal subjects” as liminal subjects, that is, on the threshold of ethics and aesthetics.⁴ More was demanded of me. But, given the limitations of my own flesh, I could neither abandon my own embodied being, nor enflesh the other body by mine, for as Husserl intimated, my animate organism “holds me wholly”.⁵ And so, amidst all this experiential complexity, if not confusion, I must begin my analysis at the point of the greatest inflection, by asking, *How can abnormality of the body can be available to us most generally?*

One can proceed answering these questions in a variety of philosophical tonalities: with Kant and the horrific sublime, thus emphasizing the transition from the speculative and manifest (passive) comprehension of monstrosity to the practical moral action as in rejecting the abnormal on the grounds of its abnormality; with Freud and the drive to transform traumatic experiences into aesthetic manifestations; or with Kristeva and the subconscious abject that passes over any comprehension, a true mania of the ungatherable other. Each of these tonalities is worth exploring in itself; yet, none of these perspectives echoes the straightforward simplicity of the experienced awe. My experience was bereft of the other as some sublimated evil monstrosity, a disgusting creature of my nocturnal life; on the other hand, no call of the other moved me to an ethical response to the strangeness of the encounter.⁶ To me, the Contergan person appeared as neither threatening, nor repulsive, nor objectionable. As I have already stated, she appeared wondrous. At the

same time, having come from the other side of manifestation, wonder did not linger: after my awe receded, what remained in its most immediate appearance was abnormality itself. This prompts me to set my investigation in the traditional phenomenological register, with Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the abnormal perception. Importantly, for Merleau-Ponty, the ownership of the abnormal perception is reversible; this conviction gives the analyst an opportunity to touch upon a wholly otherwise experience.⁷

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty demonstrated that normally we constitute the world synesthetically, by and through gratuitous acts of self-centered intentionality. In other words, we rely on a unity of senses that, inseparably from each other, form a whole for our encounter with the whole of the external world, an alterity. Taken as a stage for apprehending this world, normality presents abnormality as a break in the unity of the sensorial input, in general, but more importantly, between the abstract and the concrete apprehensions. In introducing the distinction between the abstract and the concrete, Merleau-Ponty alters the Husserlian distinction between the active and the passive way of perceiving. Merleau-Ponty prefers the distinction between the abstract/reflective and the concrete/unreflective. The distinction is grounded in the function of the perceived background. Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes, "The abstract movement carves out within that plenum of the world in which concrete movement took place a zone of reflection and subjectivity; it superimposes upon a physical space a virtual or human space" (p. 111).

In other words, the normal modality possibilizes abstract movements through projection, filling the open space with what does not naturally exist by making it take semblance of existence. The fillings are words, gestures, and motions, all that which signify a human being capable of connecting to the world beyond its actual presence.⁸ From this perspective, the abnormal body appears to be ill-disposed of projecting meaning on what Merleau-Ponty calls "free" space; it dislocates, mangles this space. Using his favorite example for ab-normal perception, Mr. Schneider, Merleau-Ponty (1962) elaborates, "Schneider's abstract movements lost their melodic flow. Placed next to each other, like fragments, end to end, they often run off the rails on the way" (p. 116). In other words, in the abnormal perception, the immediate synthesis is replaced by the interrupted stop-and-go activity predicated on the linear relationship between various senses. The abnormal perception is no longer at ease with the once familiar world; it constantly battles against its own failing memory.

From this account, I can interpret my experience of the Contergan's body as a rupture in the constitution of her free space. However, if I attend to her body as an origin of this rupture, I will inevitably fall into the mundane mode of appropriating the abnormal other vis-à-vis my normal constitutive self. In that regard, I will be taking the Contergan person as an assimilable aberration, a human freak performing the spectacle of abnormality for my voyeuristic gaze. I will be able to understand her presence as an exemption from the normal world, its expectations and anticipations. Or, from a similar perspective, I can perceive her body as a disabled sick body, a reminder of human frailty and mortality. However, as I pointed out earlier, the Contergan body's abnormality did not indicate either a social deviance or a medical dysfunction. To me, she was simply, or as the following analysis intends to demonstrate, not so simply, wondrous: odd and, at the same time, inassimilable.

What does this mean, inassimilable, odd? What recourse does this definition have to our mundane experience? In order to answer these questions we need to shift our focus, for Merleau-Ponty's medicalization of abnormality clearly requires a modification. Based solely on the Schneider's case, Merleau-Ponty's descriptions posit the abnormal as an actual breach of normality (Schneider was a war veteran whose specific perception of the world resulted from a wound in the head). In contrast, the Contergan person's abnormality is an inborn condition, something that precludes the self or other comparative analysis. Simultaneously, we need to switch from the abnormal perception to the perception of the abnormal, as its only through my perception of the Contergan woman that I came to know her. Although mutually implicated, abnormality as the perceived and the perceiving abnormality do not coincide already because I cannot possibly access the other's abnormal perception. It will be counter to the phenomenological explication not only to suggest that I can assume the other's experience, but also that I can perceive them in the same way as myself. I can typify my experience as to the other, but never access it, not even partially. This requisite becomes prohibitive in the case of the Contergan's body, whose radically different experiences I cannot even surmise.

Since Merleau-Ponty's notion of abnormality stems from Husserl's analysis of the aesthetic body, we might benefit from visiting *Ideas II*, where Husserl addresses both the issue of the body and its ways of constituting the world and the other.⁹ In contrast to Merleau-Ponty, in his analysis, Husserl situates abnormality within the normal experience. Although his

notion of abnormality is devoid of the radical breaks in the perception of the world, his formulaic might be beneficial to our purposes. Its thrust is as follows: when an unfamiliar experience arises from its own anomaly, the body overcomes the anomalous by normalizing it, making it an optimality, even if temporarily. When the world challenges the body's normal way of proceeding with its Being-in-the-world, the body engages the same mode; it will seek to familiarize foreign experiences by making them optimal for the future encounter with them. As a result, Husserl's analysis shows that the structure of normality presupposes the encounter with the abnormal as an everyday occurrence.

In line with this reasoning, Husserl distinguishes between assimilable and inassimilable experiences. Assimilable abnormality is what can and becomes optimal for our perception. For example, a crutch creates an optimality within the body's abnormal motions. In comparison, the experiences impossible to incorporate are called "alien." Such experiences include animal experiences (unattainable by definition), madness (an experience that cannot reflect on itself), childhood experiences (these become lost in the secondary repetitiveness of adulthood), and the experience of the cultural Alien. The animal case aside, only the cultural Alien falls into the category of the genuine alien, the alien that is given in the paradoxical mode of accessibility in the mode of original inaccessibility, according to Husserl. It is the intergenerational historical mode of constitution that makes the cultural Alien completely inaccessible. The Contergan body stands as the alien for two reasons: because, although accessible as a body, it is inaccessible in its very abnormality and because its specific abnormality is a group abnormality. Unlike the sick body getting better, that is granting access to itself through association or empathy, the alien body throws a radical challenge to the intersubjectively normal ways of constitution by constituting itself in and through a history of its own unique species.¹⁰

At this point, I would like to offer a more detailed description of the Contergan body as belonging to a species of its own. Since the normal body is given as a spatially situated body but also a body moving itself and reaching outside of itself, I will focus only on three aspects of the Contergan abnormal motility: bodily spatial orientation, distance motions, and body proxemics. The three aspects are intricately interconnected and most clearly seem to depend on the function of the upper and lower extremities. The upper extremities travel the body in space, constituting it at large and in relation to other moving objects and persons; the lower extremities, on

the other hand, make the body at home in a place of its own, manipulating the most immediate environment and creating a reachable and graspable habitat.

Roughly, we might draw the distinction between the movement that intends to cover distance and the movement that “fixes” what has been attained by these other movements. The first kind deals with the constitution of space, the latter constitutes a place for the body to rest. In rest, the body may lie, or stand, or sit, or cuddle, or lean, or hang, or be in a number of statically justifiable positions. In motion, the body is directed toward something by moving itself or by moving what is about and around it. The normal body’s reach is not unlike the one depicted in Leonardo da Vinci’s famous drawings of the body and its proportions. This is the normal body able to create a tree of projections and actions around it. Next to the painting of Leonardo’s human body, the Contergan person is visibly deformed. His arms are cut at the shoulders and his legs are shortened. If put in Leonardo’s drawing, his tree of projections will be more of a desert brush, dried up and crooked.

As you can see, the options outlined for the normal body are not available for the abnormal body. More concretely, the Contergan woman that I saw at the exhibit had no arms; only a short right-shoulder stub. Her feet were deformed at the ankles preventing her from long-distance, if any distance, movements. At the same time, her toes had an unusually high level of dexterity that allowed her to use them for reaching, grabbing, and holding, as well as manipulating held objects. Yet, if not for the electrical chair, she would not have been mobile; the chair was not just a needful thing but a place that held her, suspended her body in a sitting position of a normal body. But sitting her body was not, moving in the chair freely as a child would in the adult size arms chair (we should not forget that the Contergan torso is dwarfed). In addition to the shoulder stub, she also used her toes to move the machine and herself in it. At best, she was slouching upwards, half sitting, half-lying. In this skewed configuration, the range of her outward movements and motions was limited but not devoid of precision and grace.

Despite its radical difference, however, the Contergan body does not exist outside of the relationship with the normal body, whether it is a relative, hired help, or any other “normal” person. The normal and the abnormal co-affect and co-constitute each other as both actual bodies and virtual projections. *How do they share this space?* In the Husserlian account, what

relates embodied subjects is empathy which makes “nature an intersubjective reality and a reality not just for me and my companions of the moment but for us and for everyone who can have dealings with us and can come to a mutual understanding with us about things and about other people” (Husserl, 1940, p. 91). Sameness in the constitution of space and time is a given; if an anomaly arises for one body, the other body would ignore it, carrying out the task of correcting the anomalous perception. In this set-up, the abnormal body of the other will remain abnormal unless the community, together with its source, accepts the abnormal way of constituting the world as optimal and thus normalizes the formerly abnormal perception.

If, however, the normal and the abnormal meet as radically different species, as a socially accepted fact, their co-affective constitution will not result in sameness but simultaneously unraveling differences. The projection onto the free space will bring about rupturing disjointedness, albeit given in abstraction. Since all the bodies are free to access, that is, constitute the free space, the interaction between the bodies is inevitable. The other’s body, whether normal or abnormal, serves as a completion of a social system, but also introduces constitutive possibilities as to the world itself. Merleau-Ponty (1962) explains: “This disclosure of the living body extends to the whole sensible world, and our gaze, prompted by the experience of our body, will discover in all other ‘objects’ the miracle of expression” (p. 197).

The body confirms and elaborates the pre-existent world. Due to its freedom to accomplish human history, the body ceases to be a mere fragment of the world, and turns it into a theatre, a remarkable prolongation of its own dealings. Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes, “Insofar as I have sensory functions, I am already in communication with others taken as similar psycho-physical subjects” (p. 352). The co-affective constitution of the world endows the abnormal body with the freedom that extends beyond a momentary disruption of the normality, turns it into a productive force capable of projecting the kind of meaning that can only be described as artistic.¹¹ “The body,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “is to be compared not to a physical object but rather to a work of art” (ibid., p. 150). This insight echoes certain Husserlian considerations introduced in *Ideas I*. Husserl’s insights link art to abnormal perception. For Husserl (1931), a painting is given as a quasi-being, or “neither as being nor as non-being” (p. 287). Husserl explores artistic givenness as a neutrality modification of perception, meaning a partial suspension of normal perception of the world. The reduction is partial because of the body that can never apprehend the painting

fully. But, even in its partial function, neutrality modification lifts the veil of the everyday, implicating the body. Husserl calls this kind of perception “fancy consciousness.” In other words, a leap of imagination is required to achieve the act of suspension. A combination of imagination and straight perception makes fancy consciousness a synthetic consciousness capable of fulfilling several acts simultaneously.

At this point, we must persist, *But how?* Husserl remains ambiguous on this issue. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of style might help us with an answer. For him, style is a unity of tactile and visual percepts. Style is intrinsic not only to bodies but also to artistic expressions: “A novel, poem, picture or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning, accessible only through direct contact” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 52). It is in this sense that our body is a work of art. In the same sense, the work of art has a body. Merleau-Ponty calls a painting a nexus of living meanings that speaks the primordial silence. It is from this silence that a subjectively oriented style arises. Visually, the silence is given as depth. Yet, the depth itself is not reachable by any visual means. It does not belong to the painting. Likewise, it does not belong to the body. But it does belong to the world. We understand art “only if we place, at the center of the spectacle, our collusion with the world” (ibid., p. 429). The abnormal body gives away its specific unreplicable style. Its style emerges from the silence of the inassimilable alienness. Let us return to the description of the Contergan body.

She moved as if she was not assembled properly, as if her body parts were disjointed at the points that put the whole frame of her body in question. She was a collage made of odd objects; her arm stub and her twisted legs looked as if they came off from a non-human creature. Her stately head, much larger than her body, had a solemn expression giving her a distinctly nonaligned look. Her body, small and fragile, half a body, appeared to be torn apart by some mechanical mangler of flesh. This strange assimilation of incompatible parts made her movements as bizarre and as majestic as if she was a royalty raised from some underground dream-world, invading one’s peace and usurping it, leaving us with nothing but emptiness in the wake of explosive astonishment and awe. In a helplessly powerful way, she took away our so-called reality, making us realize that it does not really belong to us, that reality we are used to call home. The alienness of her style awakened a being that could not be incorporated in the dynamic duration of normalizing. This style came into a remarkable constitutive relationship with the

style of the normal body. The interaction between the two suspended the normal, giving birth to the uncanny. It is time to ask ourselves, *What does it mean for the abnormal body to be given as uncanny? What does the uncanny body express?* In answering these questions, we are facing a dilemma. On the one hand, we can hardly escape the Freudian pull: after all, “uncanny” was an inalienable theme in his conceptualization of the unconscious from the very beginning. On the other hand, albeit a Freudian derivative, the uncanny became the foundation of the surrealist movement. The role of the uncanny for the surrealist anesthetization of the abnormal body is difficult to underestimate. It is for that reason that I find it necessary to give the key surrealist concepts an elaboration.

The Uncanny Body of Surrealism

The major tenets of surrealism were summed up by the end of its maturation in 1936 by Andre Breton who delivered the last surrealist Manifesto in Brussels to an audience associated with the movement. There, Breton (1936) confirmed the ongoing voyage of the surrealist “thought” as “it came normally to Marx from Hegel, just as it came normally to Hegel through Berkeley and Hume” (p. 3). The allusion to philosophy was not made in jest; it indicated an intellectual tradition linked to the history of humankind. The thought erupted in surrealism through expressive action, instantly gaining into “a living moment, that is, to say a movement undergoing a constant process of becoming” (ibid., p. 4). The key principle of surrealism, as Apollinaire called this idea in action, was to seek after new values in order to confirm or invalidate existing ones. Unlike the precursor of surrealism, Dada, the surrealists did not seek to destruct or shock. The search for the new values should result in bringing about “the state where the distinction between the subjective and the objective loses its necessity and value” (ibid., p. 13). Reverberations onto the phenomenological view of the social world raise clear in the first definition of surrealism as “pure psychic automatism” (ibid., p. 7). In order to reach this state, one needed to perform a kind of reduction that placed the surrealist outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations in the collective subconscious of a Freudian kind.

The combination of dream and reality was what defined surrealism primarily. The surrealists were also keen on psychologizing chance; their ways of doing so included the technique of “anticipatory chance-making” when an artist would create by the means of chance, e.g., abrupt disruption

of the artistic activity.¹² In opposition to the bankrupt values of the petite bourgeois that feared everything that is wondrous, surrealism offered the rediscovery of the wonder in the abnormal in the sense of the most surreal. At the same time, this very surreality should never leave reality; it should “reside in reality itself and will be neither superior nor exterior to it. According to Breton (1936), “The marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful; indeed, nothing but the marvelous is beautiful” (p. 9). The search for the beautiful involved initially incompatible objects, states, and events. Taken outside of their respective nexuses of meaningfulness and recombined in new states, meant to explode the solid mundane go of the world, on the one hand, and create an insight into the world before the socialized formulae.

Breton identifies three periods for surrealism. The initial, “intuitive” period is fascinated with psychoanalysis, the Freudian uncanny. It was also the period that sought to undermine any kind of self-moralizing normality. The second period that settled in the early nineteen thirties is characterized by the rational drive to turn dreaming into a myth of the dream, bring the myth from the recesses of the forgotten memory. The third and the final period, the one yet to come, for Breton, and the one that was ceased midway by the war, dealt with the history, the creation of an inter-generational narrative that would secure the transition from one generation to another. In sum, the three periods of surrealism begot, shaped, and brought to sociality the uncanny which, in the last instance, could break through the realm of transcendence into such manifest forms of representation as painting, photography, and narrative. The object of these transformations, the abnormal body, found its texture, figure, and enunciation in these three interconnected modalities. It would be only too appropriate to begin with the modality of the abnormal body’s first appearance.

The Surreal Horizon of Max Ernst

In the description of my experience, I mentioned that the Contergan woman was situated next to Max Ernst’s painting “The Teetering Woman,” also known as “Equivocal Woman.”¹³ Let us examine the painting closely (see Figure 3). In the painting we see a woman whose body is suspended above the dark surface. It appears that she is trying to balance herself. However, it is not quite clear in relation to what she might be trying to achieve this balance. Her suspended state is suspect for the normal perception; she



Figure 3. Max Ernst, *Teetering Woman*, 1923

is not walking on any surface; nor is she leaning against any surface. She rather floats in a relation to the machine, being somewhat attached to its ambiguous mechanics. The machine also seems to be suspended. The green bars that go down into the darkness of the opening between the two columns are the only connecting structures; and nonetheless they fail to disambiguate the purpose of the woman and the function of the machine. As the second title for the painting suggests, the woman is equivocal; her only purpose is to maintain equilibrium at some limit. The woman's eyes are

hidden behind the pipe that comes out of the machine but does not have its quadra-linear geometry. The pipe looks more organic than the woman herself, who, in her brownish, machine-matching color scheme looks dead, doll-like. The hair on the woman's head suggests that the body was inverted back to the upright posture from the original upside down position. The background of the painting is reminiscent of Chirico's landscapes: industrial columns, indefinite perspective, and an incidental object that gives the arrangement of figures in the painting a unity of focus. Yet, the depth of the appearance is compromised, broken. *How shall we interpret such a painting in relation to our topic?*

First, we can say that the painting gives the encounter with the lived abnormal body of the Contergan woman a context by way of horizon. Uniquely, the woman blends into the painting as it—the painting—creates a sense of indifferent dehumanizing environment, an environment, where the human body is dulled, robbed of



Figure 4. Max Ernst, *Celebes*, 1921

motion and sight, suspended to meet its own dream as it walks without walking to gain a place it cannot by definition reach. The painting is a classical, for the early twentieth century, critique of technology that assists the person by delivering the person to sleep in a place where the sleeper walks erect, as if in the waken state. Her dream is a psychoanalytic dream of the broken memory, a history interrupted by its own deception. The woman blends with the machine, dependent but unaware of her dependence, just like the Contergan person, a product of the technological panacea mixed on the desire for a relief from being. She is also one with the machine in a phenomenological way as it is the machine that co-constitutes her movements. It suspends her by providing the ground upon the ground we share.

The painting's history testifies to its significance. Ernst did it in 1923 breaking a long stride of collage making. After many years of experimenting with collages, Ernst came to the realization that collage often lacks in the ability of creating a meaningful interface between different originally unrelated components. His new idea required a synthetic medium, a medium that would create a unified impression. But some of the collages that immediately preceded the painting alert us to the possibility that the main constituents of the image were a female acrobat, a sleepwalker, and a machine for spreading oil on water. Ernst combined the acrobat and the sleepwalker in one image while "freezing" the oil coming out of the machine. The images were cut out from the medical, popular, and technical journals. The precursor to the teetering woman is the mechanical monster, "Celebes" (see Figure 6).¹⁴ The elephantine meat grinder machine is in fact a reproduction of a photograph of a Sudanese corn holder. It was common for Ernst to re-use ready-mades, adding or deleting certain fragments so that the new reality would spell a different, often sinister, world. There is also the German rhyme that is associated with the painting: "The elephant from Celebes has sticky, yellow bottom grease..." By positioning the female torso in the front ground of the painting, Ernst indicates that she might be the end product of the machine's workings: creating sublime dreams of beauty and horror.

As much as Ernst himself was teetering on the edge of abnormal and absurd, the abnormal body of the Contergan person was teetering on the edge of the surreal; beautiful as only surreal dreams could be beautiful. The context of the encounter between the two-dimensional art and the abnormal body that spawned the experience of the surreal was serendipitous. *But was it really unique? Would such a transformation be possible without the flat horizontality of a self-imposed aesthetic background? Can the abnormal body*

be art for the experience of the visual aesthetics? For the answer I suggest that we turn to Joel-Peter Witkin, a contemporary American photographer, who seeks and finds beauty within the grotesque spectacles of humanity: dwarfs, hermaphrodites, amputees, carcasses, and “any living myth” in the words of Witkin himself. The experience of his work is saturated with the dense emotional complexity and tension. For Witkin, this experience is precisely surreal. Early in his career, when he just began to look for beauty in the horrific sublime, Witkin turned to Chirico and Dali for inspiration. “We try to control chance, make it formula, but to be actually overwhelmed by the wonder and the beauty is quite another thing. Poetics and surrealism does not exist within that kind of parameters of association” (Witkin, 1990, p. 3). In one of the interviews, Witkin describes his work as a hysterical process of collage-making and cites Ernst as his inspiration that taught him how to combine paper cuttings with photographs to create a subverted pictorial space for the real. Except that in Witkin’s art, the real people are the cutouts.

Exemplar I: Surreal Figure

Witkin’s indebtedness to Ernst is evident in the production of richly textured, highly manipulated prints which betray the surrealist style. Meeting with macabre experiences as a child and developing an empathetic response to them gave him an eye on the abnormal, a see-through that embraced both the human materials and the non-human material. The mangled forms orchestrated into familiar motifs draw on history, religion, and classical aesthetic forms. It is told that after seeing a 19th-century ambrotype of woman and her ex-lover (who had been crudely scratched from the frame), Witkin challenged the sanctity of the untouched photograph and began the years of experimentation which characterize his contemporary work. He employs a highly intuitive approach to the physical process of making the photograph, including scratching the negative, bleaching or toning the print, and an actual hands-in-the-chemicals printing technique.¹⁵ The end result is a challenge to the bourgeois principles of artistic beauty. For the overriding principle of aesthetic abnormality, Witkin poses suffering, the ultimate human condition. Contrary to some critical voices, the portrayal of grotesque abnormality does not seek to shock. Nor does it intend to reinstitute abnormality as an alternative to normal corporeality. Rather, it seeks to pose abnormality beyond the discussion about the normal/abnor-

mal in the sphere of surreal. Below I would like to present an example that derives from that sphere.



Figure 5. Joel-Peter Witkin, 1992, *Satiro*

audacity to struggle with Hercules himself. Rubens' Satyr would be that paradigmatic self who, filled with darker powers, enjoys having them out unleashed (see Figure 6). Unlike its prototype, Witkin's "Satiro" is of a different kind. His armless body is strapped, crossed by leather bands in the style of Ancient roman depictions. Uncharacteristically for Witkin's mostly studio arrangements, Satiro sits outside in the open next to a tree. His company is a dog, the guide to the kingdom of the dead. The expression on the face of Satiro is strangely divergent from the expected gleefulness of the forest God. An anecdote is associated with this image. The man in the photograph is a Mexican actor who plays shamans in Spanish conquistador films. In order to convince the man to pose for him, Witkin had to go all the way to Mexico City. After several days of negotiating, Witkin bought two crowns of thorns and arranged for a site, a pasture in the Mexican countryside. The local shepherd

In the 1990 photograph called "Satiro" Witkin bedazzles the viewer with an uncanny creature (see Figure 5). The creature is a man without arms but with colossal legs of a goat, or horse, just like any other Satyr. A mythological demi-God, or forest God, Satyr is a creature as mischievous as it is powerful. He keeps company with Nymphs, bestowing the art of seduction on both men and animals. Satyr's massive legs allow him to overcome galloping horses, while the mighty arms give him



Figure 6. Paul Rubens, *Satyr*, 1615, *Satyr with Maid and Fruit Basket*

was paid to leave his herd and his dog, and the stump man was seated next to a tree. "And my expression?," asked the actor. "Imagine that you are a god who wants to look human," Witkin instructed.¹⁶ This disclosure of the daemonic withdrawing into itself is what Satiro is about: the living myth, a creature so alien that it creates its own context, fuses it in the act of indigent intentionality. And, at the same time, there is familiarity in the image: that introspective pensive pause is the opening that lets the creature become a part of my perceivable world.

One can imagine now how the Contergan woman can and indeed becomes the other of the real, a mythical creature of the world that is yet to show itself. No longer adumbrated by the horizontality of the other, she forms a horizon by her own figuration, a grand and irreducible presence. Her deformity ceases to be a lack; it rather projects a surplus whose density and texture is inaccessible to a normal vision of otherness. She arises with the context of its own, a mythical creature whose movements separately and with the machine form an aesthetic alterity that calls to itself, makes us wonder. Unlike Ernst's "Teetering Woman," or Witkin's "Satiro," however, she is surreal not because she is made to be so, but because an encounter with her makes her so. I still remember the sense of a loss that I experienced at the site of her moving away, leaving the stage of my world, taking away the dreams and the myths with her. I remember with what certainty I knew that I would never see her again, wishing she would not go, leaving me but with a sense of nostalgia, wishing I could talk to her, ask her for her name. This desire to keep wonder from dissipating moves us to engage narrative memory as what saturates our ordinary lives, in the absence of the surreal, with the extras of dream and myth, fantasy and fancy, daemonic and divine. And so, in the next section, I would like to address the last encounter with the surreal, in and by narrative.

Exemplar II: Narrative Surreality

In the second exemplar for this essay, I suggest that we turn to Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*. In the novella, the leading character, Lauren Hartke, a performance artist by vocation, first loses her husband, Rey Robles, a controversial film director and then meets a strange man in the attic of an East coast summer rental, the last place where she and her husband lived. The shock caused by her husband's act and the inability to cope with it open Lauren up to an experience that defies customary understanding. At first,

Lauren feels as if she is going mad, losing her ground. Her body is becoming more and more estranged from herself as she begins to experience involuntary tremors and shakes, near faints and disorientations, as in “small helpless sinking toward the ground, a kind of forgetting how to stand” (DeLillo, 2001, p. 33). The emphasis is on forgetting, forgetfulness of one’s body, the very body that does things, which her friend has seen only in animations. It has never been against her, her body: “I’ve always felt smart in my body [...] It absorbs me in a disinterested way. I try to analyze and redesign” (ibid., p. 105). DeLillo describes Hartke’s ability of entering the bodies of adolescents, Pentecostal preachers, and bulimic teenagers and a pregnant man as emptying. For the metaphor of emptying DeLillo offers an empty road that Hartke watches over and over again on the Internet in real time. The road is in Finland, in the village of Kotka. A fixed over-head camera shows the road twenty-four hours a day: an occasional car passes by filling it, then it is night and emptiness again: “Kotka was another world but she could see it in its realness, in its hours, minutes, and seconds” (ibid., p. 38).

The ability of emptying herself, this gift, goes beyond empathy; it shows the possibility of achieving the abnormal normality of the other, albeit for aesthetic purposes: Hartke does not strive to assume the other’s identity, just get to the root of it. She becomes the other in her body, and it is her body that narrates the experience of the other’s body through the other. “Always in the process of becoming another,” she sheds off her sense of the body and impresses the other’s motor sensory self upon the body of hers (DeLillo, 2001, p. 105). This is what makes Hartke a body artist par excellence. She is sculptor of others, and, in her narrating those experiences, herself. This inter-corporeal faculty creates an interweaving of matter, and not just for the viewer, but for the artist as well: She is in art. She is above art. She is in truth. The juxtaposition between the two, art and truth, or shall we say, descending into truth is at the very border of surreal. And so is she a surreal artist. A liminal figure, Lauren is out and above the normal flow of time. She is in it all right, but, in an elevated sense, hovering. Being this, abnormal at the aesthetic limit, Lauren encounters a surreal experience that makes her body-art possible. Shortly after, almost immediately after her husband’s death, Lauren discovers a strange man in the attic of the summer rental. A strange man walks into her suspended reality and transforms it according to his own, astonishingly deformed, rules of space-time constitution. That is when Lauren is guided over the limit to experience time as moment. Not the kind of a moment that passes and you catch it on the way to another

moment. No, it is the kind of time that is “simply and overwhelmingly there, laid out, unoccurring” (ibid., p. 77). The little man who Lauren meets embodies the time of stills.

He narrates this time in broken, slow, repetitive speech that exhibits a flow that doesn’t know the difference between “now” and “then,” or “here” and “there.” Apparently retarded to a normal person, he is a contortionist of the normal world to Lauren, a creature who shows the world in *sur-*. His enigmatic apparition and his as mysterious appearance create a timeless double. He is thin, fragile, “it was hard to think him into being, even momentarily, in the shallowest sort of conjecture, a figure by the window in the dusty light” (DeLillo, 2001, p. 60). Mr. Tuttle, a name given the creature by Lauren, spoke in many voices, in the voice of Lauren’s husband, most importantly. He let her relive the last moments of the ordinary and the normal that now, animated by the extra-ordinary, made out into the world, still elusive, but alive. His figure, a half-broken semblance of man, cut an opening in time, made it stay still. It took many levels of perception to recognize what he was saying, many generations and social histories. When Lauren learnt the way, she took to the extremes of her own normality, and it is only by reflecting, analyzing, and designing her body in the face of the extraordinary banality of the everyday that she managed to hold onto the experience of the surreal. But even that will soon be gone leaving nothing but Hartke’s performance in its wake. The encounter with the abnormal in the aesthetic context touches upon the surreal, but does not let us dwell there. It rather leaves us with the remainder held by the fusion of the experiences. I tried to express the lingering experience of this relation in this study. Hartke does it in her performance. The repetitions of her husband’s voice overheard by the stranger gives it a body, a surreal expression that translates into the surreal body art in extremis: “Her art emerges as obscure, slow, difficult and sometimes agonizing. Silently, it twists and shapes the body into a primordial drama. But it is never the grand agony of stately images and sets. It is about you and me. It is about who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are” (ibid., 109-110).

Postscript

The abnormal body stands out. It makes an impression. The impression may last or fade away as soon as the body leaves the field of one’s perception. If it lingers, it creates the sense of something extra, something out-worldly.

In this essay, I attempted an examination of this extra as it was given to me in a most personal way, through the encounter with the abnormal body of the Contergan person. Given with and against the surrealist background, the Contergan woman did not just leave a long-lasting impression; she also suggested the surrealist foundation for this experience. Trying to understand this experience made me turn to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, whose phenomenological investigations of the body and art provided a frame for comprehending how the limit formed by the abnormal sphere could possibly coincide with the boundaries set by the artistic intentionality and how the body of the Contergan person and the body of the surreal image merged toward an aesthetic whole. As my own experience unfolded in narration and imagery, I was led to Joel-Peter Witkin's "Satiro" and Don DeLillo's "Body Artist." A close reading of those exemplars showed that uncanny abnormality could also be revealed as symbolic and narrative surreality. The former creates a still that penetrates the sphere of the normal, holding it at the limit. The latter prolongs the crossing by giving it voice. Together, they create an extra to the otherwise normal world.

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Notes

¹ After the drug was taken off the market, in 1971, a class malpractice suit against Gruenthal AG was brought up in the civil court. At the end of the trial, the 2.5 thousand plaintiffs won over 26 million D-marks in lifetime pensions.

² The term used to describe this facility is "mimetism."

³ Here and elsewhere I use the term "other" to designate both the Other as person and the other as otherness more generally. The reason for such merger is implicated in the essay's argument: the experience of the Contergan person allows for the experience of both dimensions.

⁴ In her examination of empathy, Depraz (2001) names four different stages that provide for the empathetic link on the level of the body. Among them, there are "a passive association of my lived body with your lived body and an imaginative self-transposal in your psychic states" (p. 172).

⁵ Husserl (1940, p. 315). Also, see Bernet (1998). In examining Levinas's claim of self-abnegation vis-a-vis Merleau-Ponty, Bernet agrees with the latter who poses the skin as the limit to the Other's claim.

⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the monstrous sublime, see Kearney (2003).

⁷ Levin (1999) emphasizes this very feature as crucial for the understanding of the perceived perception: "the chiasmic dynamics of the flesh suggest that certain *reversibility* take place in the perceptual field" (p. 84). This means, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, that one may not know if he perceives or is perceived. At the same time, the perceiver's body is always hers, although it may not be known as such.

⁸ In his argument for the ambiguity of the body Gallagher suggests that "[body] appears as an ability or as an available potential to interact intentionally with the world" (1986, p. 143). In other words, between the present and the non-present body, there is a space of being connected to other bodies, in flesh. Most importantly, the latter faculty is not a function of the body itself but rather a contextual feature, a call of the world, as it were.

⁹ Following Behnke (2004), it might be more correct to speak about Husserl's program being indicative rather than expository of inter-corporeality; yet, given the phenomenological ground of Husserl's indication, it can as well as be taken for a guiding clue into inter-corporeality.

¹⁰ For further elaborations on the home/alien structure, see Waldenfels (1996) and Steinbock (1995).

¹¹ The possibility for the artistic meaning to shine through the eye-to-eye encounter is also consistent with the Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis. According to Dillon, seeing and being seen is an asymmetrical event that develops within visibility (p. 304). The importance of seeing or being seen "as" is predicated on the function of the background or horizon. In the case of a painting, the horizon becomes a figure, hence the possibility of what is being seen to be being seen "as."

¹² In great detail, Dali (1932) describes this process of painting "unnaturally:" sudden seizures in front of the easel, "accidental" misapplications of colors, leaving sub-tasks unfinished, etc.

¹³ The painting is housed in Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany.

¹⁴ The painting is housed in the Tate Modern, London, UK.

¹⁵ From the 1989 interview.

¹⁶ From the 1989 interview.

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